

## Explore the ways in which a sense of place is presented in Songs of Experience: London by William Blake and one other poem.

A2 COMMENT: - lines of argument need to be clearer to allow for stronger conclusions

William Blake grew up in London in a middle-class family and lived during a time of much social unrest. In 1775 Britain engaged in a war against the American colonists; 1789 saw the French revolution shake and inspire the European countries under the rule of a monarchy then, much closer to home, Britain declared war on post-revolutionary France in 1790. Blake's personal pacifism and his prominent political activism led to his home city, featuring heavily in his works. 'Holy Thursday (Innocence)' features the landmark of St Paul's Cathedral whilst 'London' is self-explanatory in its title. Yet, Blake does not explore his home with a fond affection, instead choosing to criticise and blame societal unrest on the characters and institutions he witnesses around him.

The title and first two lines of 'London', made up of 4 quatrains, dictate a sense of place to the reader. 'I wander thro' each charter'd street', with the verb 'wander' implying the sense of the speaker being lost, or aimless. This suggests that he personally feels detached from his current 'place'. However, the adverb 'each' contradicts the interpretation of aimless given its specificity. The adjective 'charter'd' has several connotations, pertaining specifically to London. On first comprehension, it could suggest a colonialist attitude to explaining and conquering far-off lands. This could be an influence of the American Revolution which began 4 years prior to the songs of Innocence's publishing. Additionally, it could have been the influence of Thomas Paine, Blake's friend, criticised the 'royal charter' for unorthodox control of trade. Therefore, the repetition of 'charter'd' reflects the growing synonymous with 'freighted'; giving the idea that Blake is commenting on the overcrowded streets of London. Blake's masterful juxtaposition between the personal pronoun premeditating 'I wander'd' with the various interpretations of 'charter'd' (interpretations from his home and far-off endeavours) aptly creates the sense of place of London, a multi-cultural, multi-political metropolis.

In Holy Thursday Innocence, his sense of place is rooted within the juxtaposition between nature and the 'marks' left by humanity in London. 'Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters flow' produces a contrast between the looming monument of St Paul's cathedral with the Thames. It is ironic that these are contrasted given the cathedral's proximity to the Thames, yet it is also important to note Blake's deliberate reduction of the title 'saint' prior to 'Paul's', perhaps denoting a subversion of religion in British society. Nevertheless, the simile identified through 'like' demonstrates how the children's procession into the church is as natural and immortal as the Thames. However, given the Industrial Revolution corrupted and tainted the Thames, one could imply Blake feels the same sense of foreboding about the corruption of these children as the corruption of the Thames. In addition, the juxtaposition of the connotations of 'small' children against the 'high dome' of St Paul's implies a sense, not of comfort, for these neglected children, but a looming, ever-present malevolence. Thus, Blake identifies his sense of place by contrasting the characters in his poems with landmarks and political themes.

The sense of place is also established through the immovable presence of the church. Blake was exceptionally critical of the institution of religion, and in his work of 'The Marriage of

Heaven and Hell' exacerbated his disgruntlement. A pertinent point in the book echoed his sentiment: 'Thus men forgot that All deities reside within the human breast', stating his intention to remove the unnecessary mediator between humanity and God, that is the church. In *Holy Thursday*, this is explored through the guardians' failed duty but the children's redeeming innocence: 'Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own' perhaps initially rejects the idea of youthful purity as the noun 'companies' highlights their categorisation and the order forced upon them. However, 'the radiance all their own' undermines any control. Biblically, light is used as a metaphor to chase away evil, so the adjective 'radiance' implies both the light of God and their chasing away of the oppressors. In a way, the sense of place is undermined here given that 'children' are not an isolated occurrence, implying that the issue of innocence against the church is a widespread issue. Meanwhile, the presence of the church in 'London' much more explicitly refers to its corruption, within and societal. The 'black'ning church' implies both Blake's sense of the corruption of the church, gorging itself whilst London starves, yet the adjective 'black'ning' also refers directly to the smog caused by the Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, the final oxymoron of 'marriage hearse' contrasts desire and love with death and destruction, undermining the sanctity of marriage. Thus, Blake contrasts specific aspects of the London environment with national issues to demonstrate how the issues are not isolated to London.

To contrast, one could argue that sense of place is actually undermined altogether through the anonymity of characters. For example, in 'London', the third stanza presents a series of metamorphoses between the institutional culprits and the despairing Londoners: 'How the chimney sweepers cry Every black'ning Church appals' – the noun 'cry' is metamorphosed into the cause of the 'black'ning' church (here, using the interpretation of a chimney sweeper's soot 'black'ning' the church). The apathy and lack of morale from the 'hapless soldier's sigh' then 'runs in blood down palace walls'. The 'sigh' metamorphosing into the blood (presumably the soldiers') cascading down the walls of the monarchy's home. This second metaphor also serves to criticise the empire's decision to wastefully declare war. Here, Blake undermines the sense of place by criticising society as a whole: his metamorphoses dictate how it is not just a single institution at fault for the tragedies of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, but also the victims', who do not strive for change. Given his social circles comprising of radical thinkers such as Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, it is likely that this could be a form of political rally. A similar idea is presented in *Holy Thursday* in the ominous final line: 'Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door'. His use of an imperative for 'then cherish' and the pronoun 'your' do not misconstrue his intentions to instruct the reader to be more aware of their effects on London. This line serves as a warning and combined with the various negative connotations throughout 'Holy Thursday' foreshadows his *Holy Thursday Experience*, which directly contradicts this poem. It is tragic to note that during Blake's lifetime there was not much social change to transform his viewpoint from Innocence to experience, only to exacerbate it. Therefore, Blake's ambiguity creates a form of paradox. It undermines the sense of 'place' in the location of the poem yet also places the themes of the poem within every reader.

As Blake got older, his sense of place within his poetry became increasingly internalised. What didn't help was his loss of his 'radical' social circle as a result of the 1795 parliamentary 'gagging acts' which desecrated the opportunity for radical thinking. He began creating fanciful worlds and internalising his sense of religion. Hence, one could say

that Blake's sense of place was entirely as a result of his political activism, but his internalisation of religion created his paradox of the presence of London and a widespread ambiguity within his poems.